TELEVISION

Networks Under the Gun

Broadcasters have promised to clean up their act. Critics say Don't believe the hype.

Seeing the heads of all four networks gathered in the same room last week was extraordinary enough. Even more intriguing, however, were the downcast eyes and somber expressions. No wonder: after 40 years of denial, despite more than 3,000 damning studies, the TV industry's biggest guns tacitly conceded that violence on television can indeed beget violence in real life. But the remedy they so proudly unveiled on Capitol Hill—aimed at shielding young eyes from video carnage—generated almost as much heat as the malady it's supposed to help cure.

Beginning this fall, the networks will broadcast parental advisories before excessively violent programs and send similar warnings to newspapers and magazines that carry TV listings. (The most likely wording: "Due to some violent content, parental discretion advised.") As a pre-emptive strike, the announcement accomplished its mission. Many in Congress, roused by the soaring tide of prime-time gore, have been threatening federally imposed reforms. Some of those restrictions, however, would surely raise howls from First Amendment guardians, which may explain the almost palpable "whew" with which lawmakers greeted the networks' voluntary action. "I welcome these moves and applaud the decision makers," gushed Sen. Paul Simon, one of the industry's sharpest critics on the Hill.

Yet as the parental-alert plan came into clearer focus, so did all its flaws. Television drama has always shied from irony, but this one seems inescapable. In selling their own reform package, the networks provided another reminder of just how unstaunchable TV's blood flow remains. "This problem will get worse because people will think something has been done about it," says Dr. Carole Lieberman, a psychiatrist who heads the National Coalition on Television Violence (NCTV). "But all they're doing is applying a Band-Aid. It's just a sham."

For openers, the networks will decide for themselves which shows require warning flags. The plan also assumes the presence of a parent both to catch the warnings and to switch the channel. That ignores the millions of children of working parents who watch TV unsupervised (not to mention the nearly 50 percent between 6 and 17 who own bedroom sets). In fact, similar warning systems—notably, the recording industry's attempt to label explicit lyrics—tend to achieve the opposite effect. "The advisories are just a faster road map to the violent material," says Terry Rakolta, founder of Americans for Responsible Television. "Kids channel surfing will stop immediately and say, 'Hey, this is it! We don't even have to look for it'." What's more, both cable and syndicated programs, where the body counts run highest, remain exempt—as do children's cartoons, indicted by some studies as TV's most violent genre. Where applied, the advisories may even make things worse. Broadcasters, proposes Boston anti-violence activist William Abbott, "could use the warning system as a license to show programs that are even more violent—just because they've warned parents."

Network executives contend that any form of violence alert will drive off gun-shy viewers and advertisers. "Some will be pleased at that," says CBS president Howard Stringer. "But then all drama will vanish from network television." Millions of other viewers, the networks maintain, will tune out if they can't satisfy their appetite for violence. "Nightmare in Columbia County," a made-for-CBS docu-drama of a serial killer, finished third in the Nielsens last month—and that was a *rerun*. Yet there's equally formidable evidence that video mayhem may be losing its sales appeal. At the start of the 1992 season, the NCTV compiled a list of TV's 10 "most violent" series. Today, only one (ABC's

Aiming for ratings: *'Heartland' bleeds*

The Mayhem Is Kids' Stuff

A study of the 1991-92 television season shows that children's programming actually features more violence than prime time.

	CHILDREN'S PROGRAMS	PRIME TIME
Violent acts per hour	32	4
Violent characters	56%	34%
Characters who are victims of violence	74%	34%
Characters who are killers or who get killed	3.3%	5.7%
Characters involved in violence as perpetrators or victims	79%	47%

SOURCE: PROF. GEORGE GERBNER, ANNENBERG SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATIONS, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

MUSIC

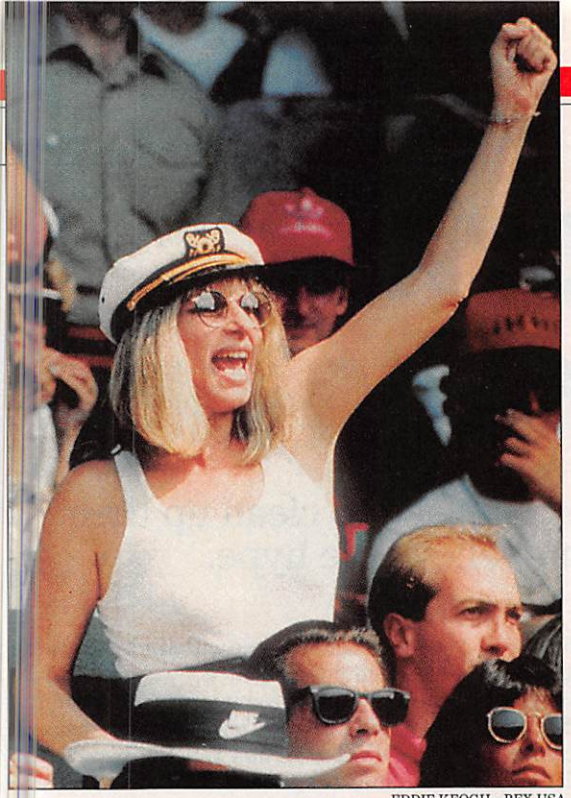
Who Knows Where or Zen

Barbra stumbles on her way back to Broadway

It was enough to make a grown woman cry in public. Last week Barbra Streisand was close to tears when defending Wimbledon heir and newly hairless (below the neck) Andre Agassi—whose playing she once described as that of "a Zen master"—lost his quarterfinal match to Pete Sampras. All this made Streisand a fodder-figure for the saber-toothed British tabloids, which detailed every move, real or rumored, that the couple made, including the possibility that Streisand skipped a preview of Andrew Lloyd Webber's older woman / younger man musical, "Sunset Boulevard," to dine with the tennis hunk. But the real news for fans of Streisand has nothing to do with her status as Friend of Zen. Last week she released "Back to Broadway" (Columbia), a follow-up to the wildly successful 1985 "Broadway Album."

Alas, the big news is also the bad news. Who knows where or when—or more important, why—but musically, Barbra Streisand has lost her way. When she erupted on Broadway in the early '60s, she was an unfettered Merman for the postwar, post-Porter generation, easily selling new repertoire and bringing fresh persuasiveness to the old. Her early albums were filled with small miracles: a heartbreaking adagio take on "Happy Days Are Here Again," the quiet, shimmering revelation of "A Sleepin' Bee," a little-known Harold Arlen-Truman Capote song.

With "Back to Broadway," Streisand returns to her roots, but only to trample them. Like the earlier recording, this one is overproduced; too often, overstuffed orchestrations all but suffocate the melodic line. But the greatest problem is Streisand, whose youthful bravery has turned to swagger. Artistically, she seems to be living backward: she had far more insight into the psyche and the heart of the American song 30 years ago than she has now. Remarkably, her pure vocal ability is almost undiminished; it's only at the top of her range—as in her pumped-up "I Have a Love/One Hand, One Heart" duet with Johnny Mathis—that there's a slightly pinched quality. So it's all the more grating that, stylistically, she has become one-note (thus achieving the seemingly impossible, making Kurt Weill sound like Andrew Lloyd Webber).



EDDIE KEOGH—REX USA

Love matches and love songs: *Streisand at Wimbledon*

Streisand, whom the late Glenn Gould once praised as "one of the great italicizers," displays such a narrow emotional range that what she conveys most often is contrivance, particularly in "Some Enchanted Evening." Stephen Sondheim's "Children Will Listen" is a sermon instead of a gentle admonition; Kurt Weill's "Speak Low" is breathy and breathless. (In the liner notes, Streisand writes, "I loved the way Ava Gardner performed the song in the movie." But her role model sure wasn't Gardner: in "One Touch of Venus," the singer Eileen Wilson dubbed her.)

Three Andrew Lloyd Webber songs—including two gloppy ballads from "Sunset Boulevard," which opens in London this month—suffer least. For despite his enormous success, Sir Andrew simply isn't in a league with the likes of Gershwin and Loesser. In one of his new songs, "As If We Never Said Goodbye," Streisand sings, "This world's waited long enough / I've come home at last." Maybe you have, but Barbra, we hardly know you.

KATRINE AMES

U2 Gets Carried Away

You weren't expecting a new U2 album, but then neither was U2. Last March, the band ducked into a Dublin studio to record a short-ish EP to help promote the European leg of its colossal world tour. It seems they got carried away and ended up cranking out the kinky, inchoate "Zooropa."

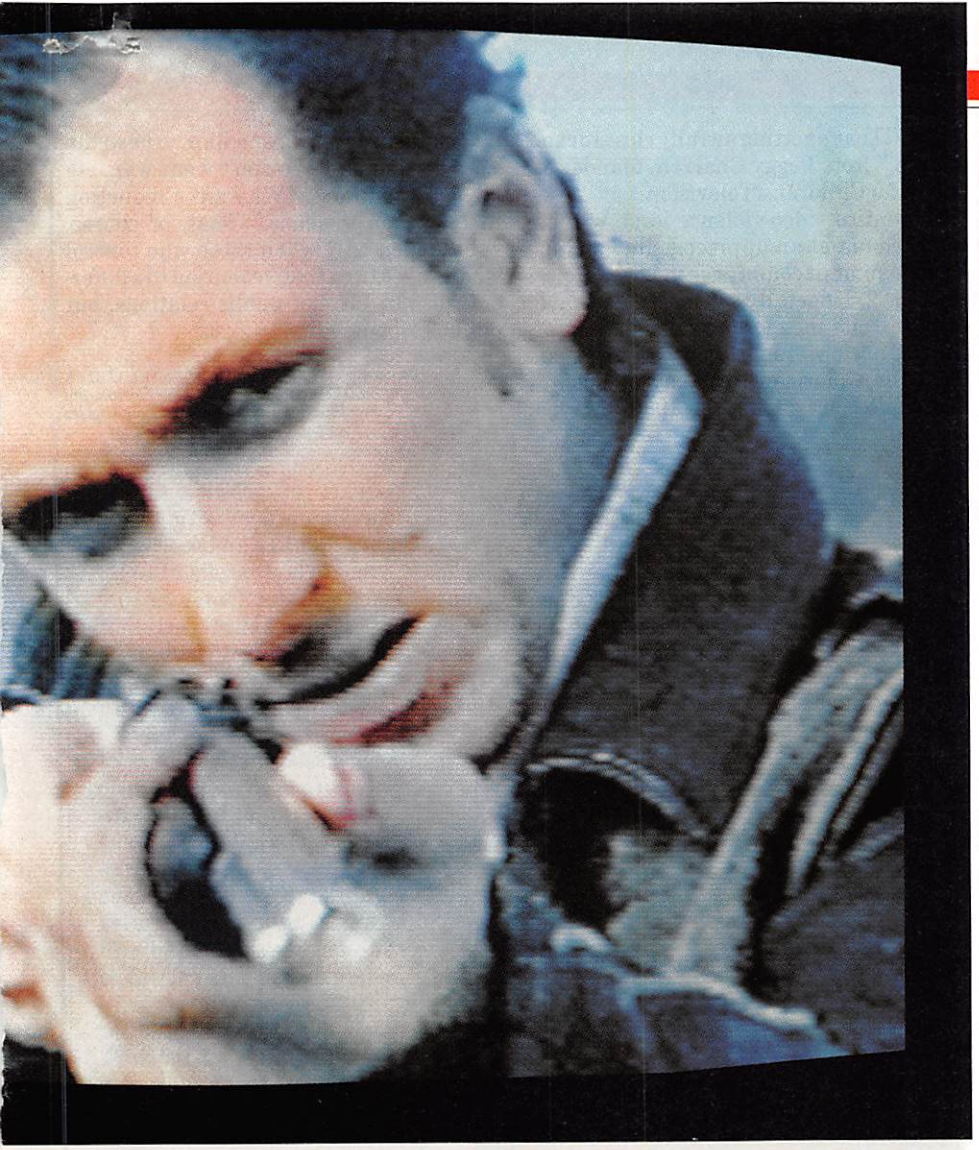
Most rock bands cling to their credibility, but U2 has been trying to shake its for some time. Last year Bono began wearing bug-eyed shades and playing the rock-star game for laughs. Now U2 delivers the confounding "Zooropa": a few great songs and some off-the-cuff studio noodling. "Zooropa" says, "Why ask why?" We know why U2 would toss off a record halfway between here and brilliance: because it can.

The chief surprises are a droning industrial tune called "Numb" with a mantralike rap by guitarist The Edge, and "The Wanderer," a strange hymn that pits a bouncy synthesizer riff against an imperious guest vocal by Johnny Cash. Bono unveils a coy falsetto on the delightfully empty-headed "Lemon." On "Stay," he beseeches a lover—and nobody beseeches like Bono. But other tunes, like "Some Days Are Better Than Others," are rhythm tracks that became songs before their time. "Zooropa" is not the next great U2 album but a postcard from a Dublin studio. The band spent three months there, and some days were better than others.

KEVIN MAZUR—LFI

The rock-star game: *Bono*

JEFF GILES



One Day's Body Count

Between the hours of 6 a.m. and midnight on April 2, 1992, ABC, CBS, NBC, PBS, Fox, WDCA-Washington, Turner, USA, MTV and HBO combined aired the following carnage:

ACT	NUMBER OF SCENES	PERCENT OF TOTAL
Serious assaults (without guns)	389	20%
Gunplay	362	18%
Isolated punches	273	14%
Pushing, dragging	272	14%
Menacing threat with a weapon	226	11%
Slaps	128	6%
Deliberate destruction of property	95	5%
Simple assault	73	4%
All other types	28	1%

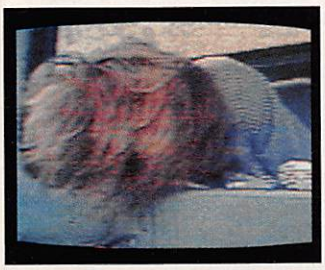
SOURCE: CENTER FOR MEDIA AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS, JUNE 1992

"The Commish") has survived Nielsen's verdict. A recent Times Mirror poll showed a remarkable jump—from 49 to 72 percent over the last decade—in the number of Americans who consider the tube unduly violent.

Of course, defining video violence remains as dicey as curbing it. NBC Entertainment president Warren Littlefield likes to divide it all into good violence and bad violence. "Good violence is dealing responsibly with things like substance abuse, incest, date rape, maniacal cult leaders, the Civil War and the Holocaust," he says. And the bad? "The glamorization of acts of violence." Uh-uh; it's more than that. It's portraying violence with a total absence of consequences. It's rewarding a protagonist for violent deeds and never showing remorse. It's telling TV's most impressionable constituency that violence is clean, cool and natural. Most of all, it's sledgehammering violence into the growing-up process. According to a study by the American Psychological Association, the average child will witness 8,000 made-for-TV murders before finishing elementary school.

In adopting parental advisories, the networks have taken a modest first step—when what may be needed is a giant leap. Few agree more strongly than Rep. Edward J. Markey,

Three Ways to Earn a Warning for Violence



Reality TV on the road to ruin

I WITNESS VIDEO:
As the reality craze sweeps across the networks, TV's violence index has hit record highs. Perhaps the most execrable exhibit is NBC's "I Witness Video." Unleashed last fall, this weekly series showed four real-life slayings—all lovingly camcorded—just in its première. It's TV's first "snuff" show.

AMBUSH IN WACO:
TV-movie producers now arrive on a crime scene before the bodies depart. But NBC's recent treatment of the Waco tragedy set a network speed record: the first shocku-drama about a horrific disaster filmed while the disaster was still unfolding. Critics groaned, but the film finished in Nielsen's top 10.

Shooting for cult-movie status

TIMOTHY WHITE—ABC

Bochco finds the color of money

NYPD BLUE:
Three months before its debut, Steven Bochco's ABC cop drama is already drawing broadsides for its raw language, nudity and blood-and-guts scenes. Both conservative watchdog groups and ABC affiliate managers are demanding that the show be toned down. It's the one series guaranteed a red flag.

chairman of the House's powerful telecommunications subcommittee, who's pressing for the installation of a so-called "V block" computer chip in new TV sets. This would allow parents, after checking the coming week's TV listings, to block all programs carrying a V rating from the gaze of their children. While the technology is ready, not everyone is eager for it—especially if, as some propose, the chip comes programmed to *automatically* zap V-rated shows. "That's getting awfully close to censorship," frets Peggy Charren, founder of Action for Children's Television.

The entire video-violence issue will be thrashed out at an unprecedented, industrywide summit conference in Los Angeles on Aug. 2. Hopefully, at least one brave voice will cite the most depressing news of all: the nation's nightly dose of gore, reports the American Academy of Pediatrics, *tripled* just during the 1980s. Maybe it's finally time for the medium to heed the Terry Rakoltas. "We don't want warning labels," she fumes. "We want a reduction in television violence." That, of course, will happen only when those who control what we see turn their attention to a different form of PR: not public relations, but public responsibility.

HARRY F. WATERS *with* DANIEL GLICK *in Washington,* CAROLYN FRIDAY *in Boston and* JEANNE GORDON *in Los Angeles*

What's So Bad About a Little Trauma?

While the psychological community now pretty much agrees about the effects of repeated TV and film violence on kids, there's still some argument on the effects of a good scare—or a bad one, as the case may be. From the time "Jurassic Park" opened last month, some mental-health professionals have been posting warnings about the "intensity" of its excitements, especially for younger children. It's not just that the dinos emit deafening roars and demolish things, like monsters of a more innocent age. These beasts look state-of-the-art real. And they *eat* people—to them, kids are just appetizers. "This movie is dedicated to making you feel like food," says psychiatrist Harvey Greenberg, an authority on scare films whose own 8-year-old quipped about this one, "Those dinos should have put on bibs." (Very funny, but wouldn't you know, the little *cinéaste* had a nightmare that night.)

Children handle scare movies differently at different ages. Up to 5 or 6, they usually have trouble distinguishing between fact and fancy. Later they develop a detached "now wait a minute" voice that allows them to face up to the witch in "The Wizard of Oz" and say, "Oh, this is a movie." Younger children don't have that voice, says Dr. Scott May, co-chairman of the committee on children's television and media of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. As a result, they can incur something like the delayed reaction of posttraumatic stress disorder. "I've had numbers of children in therapy still haunted by something that they saw two years ago," he says.

CAMPBELL LAIRD

Regardless of age, reactions may depend on how secure a child feels. "I don't think by themselves most of these movies can cause a terrible trauma," says Dr. Stanley Leiken, professor of child psychiatry at the University of California, Los Angeles. Some children are also more sensitive than others, Leiken notes. "There are kids for whom scary movies are devastating, and others for whom it's like falling off a log."

Some parents think the shrinks are too cautious. If most grown-ups enjoy a good scare, the argument goes, why deny it to kids? So what if they have a nightmare or two—does it warp their lives? A part of growing up is learning to deal with stress, notes Manhattan-based child psychiatrist Gerald Dabbs. From that standpoint, getting scared out of your Nikes is not the worst thing. "It may be very painful right now, but kids will be able to come to terms with it," says Dabbs.

Dark side: In "The Uses of Enchantment," his classic study of fairy tales, psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim went so far as to suggest that parents who censor the grimmer Grimms and gorier stories can squelch their children's imagination. "The dominant culture wishes to pretend, particularly where children are concerned, that the dark side of man does not exist." But Bettelheim failed to distinguish between oral tales and today's visual media, says psychiatrist Carole Lieberman, who focuses on the psychological impact of films and TV. Images are seldom left to the child's imagination these days, she says. "Instead, they're left to the special-effects wizards—which makes them far more assaultive to the senses." So, best heed the ratings, Lieberman and other experts advise, meaning, in the case of "Jurassic Park," a PG-13, or parental guidance for children under 13.

All of which makes one nostalgic for preratings creature features like "King Kong." As Kong-era kids knew without parental guidance, the big lug never meant any harm to anyone—not even child psychologists. He was simply in love. But they don't make monsters like that anymore.

DAVID GELMAN